

FRAGILE SPLENDOUR AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION – BAROQUE PORCELAIN ROOMS IN PRUSSIA AND SAXONY AS MEANINGFUL TREASURES

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The colourful and eccentric letters of the Duchess of Orléans – famous as Liselotte von der Pfalz – provide us today with detailed insight into life at the French court of Louis XIV. In her typically crude and down-to-earth fashion she described, in a letter to her sister in Frankfurt in 1706, how highly valued both porcelain and lacquer work were at that time: “*Mich deucht Lack und Porzellan sind zu saubere Sachen, um vor einen Kackstuhl zu dienen, es müsste denn ein Schauscheiß sein, wie man in den Gastereien vor diesem Schauessen hatte in Deutschland*” (I think porcelain and lacquer work are much too precious to be used for a chamber pot – unless one uses the lavatory in public, in the same way that the German kings liked to eat publicly).¹ This was the period when there was a change in the manner of displaying and in people’s appreciation of important collections of porcelain at the European courts, resulting in a new type of porcelain room.

The main impetus for this development, which replaced the traditional Dutch mode of display, came, as we will see, from the Prussian court and influenced many other courts in Germany, starting with the Saxon court in Dresden.

Courtesy of the East Indian companies – and mainly the Dutch VOC founded in 1602 – the rapid increase in the quantity of imported Asian porcelain in the 17th century shifted the focus from single pieces to whole garnitures and compositions of different wares. Porcelain was moved out of the cabinets and showcases of “curiosity-rooms”, parting company with the fossils and carved rhinoceros horns they had previously shared with, and became instead the furnishings for another sort of room, where they were exhibited on tables, shelves, consoles and chimneys, often alongside works in lacquer and soapstone.

Non-traditional ideas of presentation, such as the famous mid-17th century ceiling in the Santos Palace in Lisbon, were rare compared with those disseminated



Figure 1, Engraving of a porcelain cabinet designed by Pauls Decker d.Ä. and published in *Fürstlicher Baumeister* (...), Augsburg 1711-1716 (picture: Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation)

widely by prints. So-called porcelain rooms were created from Constantinople to Sweden, from Russia to England, and in northern Europe they were mainly influenced by the display-systems developed in the Netherlands. This article looks at the German courts, especially in Prussia and Saxony, to show the different meanings and intentions behind these rooms.

In the second half of the 17th century, some remarkably large collections were founded in Germany. On her death in 1650, the Landgräfin (Countess) Amalie Elisabeth von Hessen-Kassel left over 1000 pieces of porcelain. She had inherited most of them from her mother, a Princess of Nassau-Orange. Her successor, Landgräfin Maria Amalie, had amassed more than 2600 pieces by her death in 1711, and had used

them to furnish some small rooms and a state-kitchen.²

There was a similar situation at the court of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel. In the 1690s the Duchess Elisabeth Juliane’s porcelain-room was described as being decorated with wall-coverings in silk and needlework and furnished with several hundred items of porcelain on brackets and tables. Then, around 1709, her husband, Duke Anton Ulrich, assembled in one of seven highly organized small rooms, or cabinets, over 600 Italian majolicas and over 2000 porcelains.³ In 1662 Luise Henriette of Nassau-Orange, wife of the Elector Frederick Wilhelm of Brandenburg, installed a small porcelain room, with gilded leather wall-coverings and wall-brackets, in the castle at Oranienburg. We will come back to this later.

It seems that the fashion for small porcelain-rooms in the 17th and early 18th century was mainly developed and perpetuated by women such as: Queen Mary of England,⁴ Queen Christina of Sweden, Luise Henriette of Nassau-Orange, Sophie Charlotte of Prussia, Sybilla Augusta of Baden,⁵ Duchess Magdalene Augusta of Saxony-Altenburg etc. As Cordula Bischoff has shown in her study of women’s state apartments in the baroque period, these rooms are indicative of the competitive taste and imagination among ladies of the time.⁶ Whether devoted to porcelain, lacquer, amber, mirrors, or *pietra dura* and so on - all marked the end of the apartment, beyond the bedroom. These rooms were small in size. Along with the delicate and precious materials used in their decoration, the scale of originality was set by the degree of illusion and the degree of ornamentation.

Only later examples are preserved or survive in photographs, like those in Merseburg, Pommersfelden, Arnstadt and Altenburg,⁷ Munich, Vienna, Ansbach etc. In some, the confusion created by mirrored walls was more significant than the porcelain itself. All of these derive from ornamental engravings by, for example, Daniel Marot or Paulus Decker (figs. 1 and 2). Decoration, the value of the materials and the *raffinement* of the details were all the aim of these special interiors.

In Prussia, we find the very same development. The aforementioned, Luise Henriette of Nassau-Orange, married to Frederick Wilhelm, Elector of Brandenburg, installed a small cabinet in her castle at Oranienburg, north of Berlin in 1662. It is only from a 1699 inventory that we know that this room had wall-coverings of blue and gilded leather, a ceiling with coloured flowers in plasterwork and wall-brackets and shelves around the chimney wall.⁸ One year after her death in 1667, her

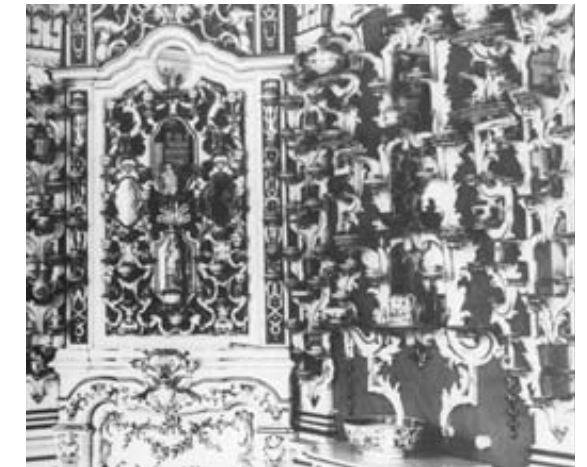


Figure 2, Chimney wall of the porcelain cabinet in Arnstadt, around 1735, photograph taken beginning of 20th century (picture: Author)

husband married Princess Dorothea of Holstein-Glücksburg and presented her with a small castle, Caputh, in the country near Potsdam. She not only furnished the castle in luxurious Dutch style, but installed a porcelain cabinet, too. Unfortunately we do not know anything about the porcelain’s presentation in this room.

In 1688 the Elector died and his son ascended the throne as Frederick III. In 1701 he was crowned, becoming Frederick I, first King in (not of, as will be explained later) Prussia. He was married to a Princess of Hannover, Sophie Charlotte, sister to the future King George I of England.

Frederick gave Caputh to Sophie Charlotte, although she did not take up residence there. Instead she built another *château de plaisance*, which is today famous as Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin. Here, in 1695, she installed – “following the rules” – a small porcelain room, which is described in an inventory as having small gilded *étagères* with mirrored walls at the corners and holding 400 porcelains and 80 fayences.⁹

At this time the (predominantly) female fashion for small porcelain rooms was adopted by Frederick and took on a completely different meaning.

He had inherited the Oranienburg Palace from his mother and added four wings to the original (smallish) house. One of them housed the Elector’s apartments. At the end of the *enfilade* of rooms, behind the bedroom, there was a small lacquer cabinet room. So far, the apartment followed the European standard, but behind this tiny room, through another door, the



Figure 3, Porcelain room in Oranienburg Palace, engraving by Jean Baptiste Broebes and published in *Prospect der Palläste und Lust-Schlösser Seiner Mayestätt in Preussen* in Augsburg 1733 (picture: Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation)

visitor entered a hall. This was not only higher and wider than all other rooms of the castle, but also had large windows to three sides, a floor of white marble, free standing columns and walls covered completely with highly expensive mirrors, ordered from a (mirror glass) manufactory that Frederick had taken over in the early 1690s. In front of these walls there were seven display stands or *étagères*, described in architect Christoph Pitzler's diary in 1695 as *thresors* or *buffets*.¹⁰ Around the mirrored sections of the walls, and along the beams, porcelain plates were fixed directly to the wall with plaster. Garnitures of vases were placed in the cornice. Little brackets were attached to the fluted columns for holding teabowls. The *étagères* were set with hundreds of pieces of porcelain and these reflected in the mirrors to become shiny blue and white pyramid-shaped cascades. In the centre of the room, another pyramid of gilt and marbelised wood held monumental vases.

This room broke completely with Dutch tradition because the porcelain became integral to the architec-

ture. Saucers and plates covered the structural parts of the room - one would have even thought that it was constructed of porcelain. The spaces in between these elements were either mirrors or windows. No paintings, textiles or lacquer disturbed this confusing play between reality and illusion. An engraving by Jean Baptiste Broebes, made around 1695 and published in 1733, illustrates this perfectly (fig. 3).

However, the most important aspect of the room was the ceiling – the only part of the original room to survive (fig. 5). In the centre there is an allegorical scene painted by Augustin Teerwesten with the figure of Orania in an orange dress seated on clouds, holding porcelain. She is surrounded by *putti* and assistants, all holding types of blue and white porcelain known in Europe at that time, such as a hexagonal Japanese jar and cover with phoenix decoration. The sun god Apollo approaches behind them. The corners of the plasterwork around the painting depict the symbols of the Order of the Garter and Frederick's initials with the Elector's hat.

If we remember that in the 1690s Frederick was already hoping to become King, so as to elevate and enhance his position in the Holy Roman Empire, the iconographical programme of the ceiling and the signifi-



Figure 4, Ceiling of the porcelain room in Caputh Palace (picture: Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation, R. Handrick)

cance of the porcelain, seems much clearer. With the symbol of the Garter he presents himself as a member of the most important Protestant order and, furthermore, shows his family connections with an important European kingdom since he was a direct cousin to King William of England through his mother Luise Henriette. In this way, he came to hold the title Prince of Orange. The blue and white porcelain therefore served in this context not just as demonstration of wealth, but as a sort of dynastic symbol. Porcelain, mainly imported into Europe through the Netherlands over the previous 100 years, was as much a symbol of the House of Orange as the orange tree. We will come back to this in our discussion of Charlottenburg.

Frederick turned Oranienburg into a porcelain palace. In any of the rooms of his apartments the overdoors and chimney pieces were decorated in Dutch style with *wucaï*, *blanc de chine*, blue and white, *fayences* and red stone- and earthenware (Chinese and Mexican). The 1699 and 1743 inventories list all these ceramics and we can see that colours and types were mixed. The wood panelling of some rooms was

lacquered in white and painted in blue as was some furniture, and was listed in the inventory as “decorated blue and white in the manner of porcelain”. In the main hall of the castle, devoted to the House of Orange, the Elector installed a permanent *buffet*, set with porcelain and glass, including several big Kakiemon style jars and covers. Only one of them has survived. A depiction of one of these vases was the main subject on the ceiling of his study. Two other ceilings, also destroyed in WW II, were also decorated with porcelain. Near the *buffet* in the Hall there was a chiming clock (*carillon*) with bells made out of upturned Asian porcelain bowls.

After his coronation in Königsberg in 1701, Frederick, now King in (he could not call himself King of Prussia as he did not have the necessary permission from the Holy Roman Emperor, as will be explained later) Prussia, travelled back to Berlin, via Oranienburg. Johann von Besser, Master of Ceremonies to the Prussian Court, commented on his triumphal entry: “The triumphal arch was decorated with orange trees and big porcelain bowls to remind of the countryhouse where they are normally kept, namely Oranienburg with it's porcelain room, whose splendour puts to shame the magnificence of the largest cities.”¹¹



Figure 5, Ceiling of the porcelain room in Oranienburg Palace as it looks today (picture: Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation, W. Pfaunder)

Let us briefly return to the late 1690s. Frederick took over Caputh, the castle that his wife Sophie Charlotte had turned down (choosing instead the house that was to become Charlottenburg). Frederick used Caputh for hunting parties and therefore altered several rooms decorated by his stepmother. He added a new ceiling to the porcelain room; today it is the only surviving part of this mysterious little room (fig. 4). A painting by Jacques Vaillant shows a figurative allegory of Prussia, already crowned and with the Elector's hat beside her (even if this did not yet reflect the true situation). A Moor and group of small children are shown holding pieces of porcelain such as a *kakiemon* bowl, a large *kraak* plate and a red stoneware teapot. Once again a porcelain room conveys political symbolism.

In 1702, shortly after the coronation, Frederick started pursuing a claim he had long coveted and which today is known as the *Oranische Erbschaft* (heritage of the House of Orange). Unlike his father, who for political reasons could not claim the inheritance of his wife's mother, Amalie of Solms, Frederick insisted on being as much a descendant of his grandmother as King William of England. The quarrel was to go on until the middle of the 18th century, although Frederick had started to seize his rightful possessions and occupy estates in the Netherlands as early as 1702.

Enormous amounts of porcelain must have been brought to Prussia, such as from the castle of Honse-

Figure 6, State kitchen in Charlottenburg Palace, photograph taken in early 20th century (picture: Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation)



laarsdijk near The Hague, and Frederick immediately set about furnishing another gallery in the Oranienburg Palace with porcelain, soapstone and works in amber and precious stones. He also installed a ceramic state kitchen. Both of these were closer to the tradition of decorative porcelain rooms and were without political allusions.

In addition, Frederick undertook the enlargement of the Charlottenburg Palace. Sophie Charlotte's small country house now had to serve as a residence for her and for her husband. So, a tower and two long wings were added. Sophie Charlotte turned her existing small "cabinet" into a porcelain gallery and added a state kitchen, which was mainly decorated with big plates in the *imari* and *famille verte* styles (fig. 6).

A porcelain room was planned adjacent to the King's State Apartments. Designed by the architect Johann Friedrich Eosander von Göthe, it was only finished in 1706, one year after Sophie Charlotte's death (fig. 7). Today 2700 Chinese and a few Japanese porcelain items are on display in this room; fortunately it was not totally destroyed in 1943, unlike other parts of the castle. The porcelain on view today was bought on the art market from the late 1960s onwards (the original porcelain is now in Russia). The refurbishing is based on two engravings by Eosander, published in 1717. It is obvious that this room featured quite "old fashioned" porcelain, for example large *kraak* plates were fixed with plaster to the cornice, and transitional *wucai* vases were quite prominently placed on *étagères*. This could indicate their provenance from castles in the Dutch areas occupied by Frederick after 1702.



Figure 7, Porcelain room in Charlottenburg Palaces as it looks today (picture: Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation)

Once again, the porcelain illustrated political and dynastic claims and again the ceiling provides an important reference (fig. 8). The goddess Aurora is shown in her carriage followed by Apollo, bringing morning and day (representing light and sun) and fighting evil and darkness. The symbols of the zodiac, the continents, the seasons and the phases of the day are shown as general allegories for time and space. Four cartouches with emblems show the progress of the sun. In the northern cartouche, there is the inscription *Se ipse coronat* (crowning itself) and the solution is provided in Sophie Charlotte and Frederick, who bring wealth and light to the country and for all time.

It is worth remembering that none of this detail was provided in a room used for state occasions, as this was a private chamber, to be shown only to the carefully chosen few. Beyond is the royal box in the chapel, as at Oranienburg where the chapel could be reached directly over an open gangway. With all their political significance these rooms had far more than a simply fashionable and decorative purpose. This is what makes the Prussian porcelain "cabinets" almost unique.

When Frederick of Prussia died in 1713, he was succeeded by his son Frederick Wilhelm I, who inher-

ited empty cashboxes and debts. The glamour of the Prussian baroque court was at an end and important artists began to leave. Master of Ceremonies, Johann von Besser, who had played such an important role at the Prussian court where matters of representation and decoration were concerned, moved to the Saxon court in Dresden to work in the same position for Augustus the Strong. Architect Zacharias Longuelune, originally from Paris, also went to Dresden and became an important member of the circle of court architects.

Longuelune was eventually followed by architects Johann Friedrich Eosander von Göthe (designer of the Charlottenburg porcelain room) who left Berlin in 1713 and arrived in Dresden 1722, and his colleague Jean de Bodt, who moved to Saxony in 1728. Longuelune and de Bodt, were important figures in the group responsible for the last and definitive plans for the Japanese Palace in Dresden. However, before we can discuss this, we need to look at another parallel development between Prussia and Saxony:

As mentioned earlier Frederick, Elector of Prussia, became King in 1701, having prepared the way carefully and mainly to prove, that his political influence, his position in European politics and above all his family's dynastic importance were equal to this step. These factors would then put him in a better position with the nine Electors of the Holy Roman Empire, the nine



Figure 8, Ceiling of the porcelain room in Charlottenburg Palace as it looks today (picture: Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation)

rulers who elected the Emperor himself. However, in order to become King, he needed the consent and permission of the Emperor but Leopold I of Habsburg was not prepared to upset the fragile balance between the Catholic and Protestant rulers and so refused. Frederick managed to find another way. Since part of eastern Prussia, including the city of Königsberg (now Poland) fell outside the borders of the Holy Roman Empire, Frederick had himself crowned in Königsberg, although he could only call himself King *in* Prussia, not King of Prussia.

Only four years earlier, Elector Frederick Augustus I of Saxony had been in a similar situation when he applied for the Polish crown. Polish Kings were elected by an assembly of certain noble families and were not hereditary. Frederick Augustus was elected in 1697 but only confirmed as Augustus II, King *in* Poland, again, not of Poland. The main focus of his Polish politics for the next 35 years was to change the electoral system into a dynastic one, an aim in which he failed.

Both Frederick and Augustus now needed to justify their (very similar) new positions in Europe and to obtain the acceptance of other persons of importance in the Empire. A very important aspect of this was to make their new roles highly visible by creating the greatest splendour, by using iconographical symbols

and by the organisation of their courts.

In 1709 Augustus the Strong visited the Prussian King with the King of Denmark. The two guests were shown around, visiting Caputh, Charlottenburg and Oranienburg and seeing, of course, those three porcelain rooms.

Impressed by what he had seen, Augustus the Strong sent his architect Pöppelmann to Berlin in 1718. Several draughtsmen followed in 1730, sent to Charlottenburg to make sketches of the porcelain room and the chapel. 1718 and 1730 marked the most important phases in the planning of the porcelain room in the castle at Dresden and of the Japanese Palace.

Let us now have a closer look at Dresden and at the Japanese Palace. Augustus the Strong did not start to collect seriously before 1715, in a period when large and important collections of Chinese and Japanese porcelain had already been formed and when the Meissen manufactory had already existed for five years. Significantly, Augustus did not normally buy single pieces or small quantities, but whole collections. He acquired large quantities, without having anywhere to display them, from his ministers Flemming, Raschke, Rechenberg, Manteuffel and Wackerbarth, from the Polish Woiwode Chemetowski or from his ex-mistress Countess Teschen. Augustus soon earned the reputation of a real “porceholic”.¹²

In 1717, during this manic phase of collecting, a famous exchange of royal gifts took place: Frederick

Wilhelm I, King in Prussia, presented Augustus the Strong with 154 large pieces of porcelain from the porcelain rooms in the Oranienburg and Charlottenburg. In return, as a *contre cadeau* he received 600 soldiers from Saxony. Later on, they were installed as dragoons, which is why the largest of the Chinese Imperial vases were called “Dragoon vases” in the 19th century.

In the same year, Augustus bought a small palace, the *Holländisches Palais*, on the banks of the river Elbe, close to the centre of Dresden. Parts of the house were refurbished and used for the splendid festivities held to celebrate the marriage of his son to the Emperor’s daughter, Maria Josepha, – another clever chess move, which also highlighted his status in the European arena.

Parts of Augustus the Strong’s porcelain collection were housed in the Dutch Palace. But as it increased in size, more space had to be found. In the early 1720s, Augustus started to organize his art collections in a new way and to plan a large number of new buildings. These included enlarging a small country house in Pillnitz to turn it into a “Saxon Versailles”. It was his minister Wackerbarth who had suggested to him in a letter of 1721, that he build a *palais de porcelaine* (like the Trianon), decorating its façade with ceramic tiles and filling it with his Asian collection. A 1723 ground-plan in the Dresden archives shows there were several rooms around a central hall. In each room there is a short note in Augustus the Strong’s handwriting stating which group of porcelain was destined to “decorate” the walls, such as *kraak* porcelain, green porcelain, red porcelain.

The Pillnitz project was too ambitious and failed. So Augustus turned his attention back to the small *Holländisches Palais* in Dresden. His architects (among them Pöppelmann and Zacharias Longuelune) made suggestions for enlarging the house which, as it was now intended as a sort of gallery for Asian art, became known as the Japanese Palace.

While, the evolution of ideas for this new palace between 1725 and 1730 are not for discussion here, it is interesting to see that Augustus once again annotated the groundplans, designating which groups of porcelain should go in which rooms.

An important report, written by Johann Keyssler in October 1730 (and published in his diary of a journey through Europe in 1741) reveals, in correspondence with other parties, how the project for the porcelain palace was finalised in the summer of 1730. The ground

floor consisted of four wings around an inner courtyard and was to be furnished with the collections of Asian porcelain, each room with another prominent colour or featuring pieces with similar decoration. By contrast, the first floor would only house porcelain from Augustus’ own manufactory, founded at Meissen in 1710. Here again he wanted to arrange the porcelain, according to its “ground” colour, in different rooms. Surveying the many floorplans today, one can see the development of the sequence of colours in the rooms in the west wing.

On this floor, two main rooms in the form of long galleries were planned: an audience chamber, with a throne and a chiming clock (*carillon*) with porcelain bells (reminding us of the Oranienburg clock in the Hall of Orange mentioned earlier in this article) and free standing fluted columns set with brackets to hold small teabowls (again reminding of the Oranienburg porcelain room).

Opposite the audience chamber, on the other side of the building, a gallery decorated with several hundred large figures of local and exotic animals, in combination with monumental vases, was planned. Rooms included the chapel, the state bedroom (*federbett*), the *retirade*, the *buffet* – some, therefore, not belonging to a *maison de plaisance* but to a residence.

As the history of the Japanese Palace is not the subject of this article, I would just like to make some other important points as we move towards our conclusion. A detailed iconography was decided upon in 1735, two years after Augustus the Strong’s death (he was succeeded by his son Augustus III). The iconographical programme consisted of a relief on the façade above the entrance, designed by Jean de Bodt, and a painted ceiling in the main room (the audience chamber on the upper floor with Meissen porcelain) which was proposed by Zacharias Longuelune, but never executed.

The entrance relief shows a female representation of Saxony, seated on the throne. The Asian and European (i.e. Meissen) people offer her porcelain. For the painted ceiling of the main gallery, Longuelune intended to have three sections: two with allegories of agriculture and manufacturing, as both were important sources of Saxony’s wealth, and the middle section again depicting the people of Saxony and Asia discussing the quality of their porcelain in front of Minerva and surrounded by figures representing Taste, Sculpture, Painting, etc. Longuelune suggested choosing the moment when Minerva presents the

crown of victory to Saxony and the Asian people take their porcelain back to their ships. The Japanese Palace thus represented the ceramic triumph of Saxon porcelain.

It would take too long to explain in detail how the organisation of the different groups of porcelain and the iconographical programme worked together, but let me give a short résumé.¹³ The inner organisation of the Japanese Palace followed the design of a modern, German residence, very different from a *maison de plaisance*. All the elements of an official residence were included and the necessary hierarchy of the rooms indicated within the system of decoration and the colour schemes applied to the 32 porcelain rooms.

On one level the visitor would find a house filled with enormous treasures, looking a little bit like a collection of art cabinets. On another, they could not fail to notice the Saxon economic and artistic references and that these could even match those of the Far East. In addition, it was clear that this was the ideal residential palace for a man who was not afraid to compete with the Emperor of China or the Mogul of India, then considered the most celebrated foreign rulers in Europe. The whole palace, dedicated to porcelain, was only intended for specific functions, and that's why its meaning could be – in an almost theatrical sense – interpreted in an ideal, model-like way. The Japanese Palace was an almost incredibly perfect system of symbols for taste, wealth and most of all, political power.

The parallels with the Prussian porcelain rooms are obvious, using porcelain decorations to underline political claims and to reinforce dynastic, artistic and economic factors, while also attracting comparison with the Chinese Emperor.

None of the later porcelain rooms, no matter how richly decorated, were in the same mould, whether they were the rooms in the Monbijou Palace in Berlin, constructed for Frederick's daughter-in-law, or the cabinets in Arnstadt or Ansbach and so on, as all these rooms presented porcelain as purely decorative elements within fashionable interiors.

In conclusion, what exactly did Augustus the Strong and his son Augustus III achieve? Didn't they simply copy Prussian ideas with the help of the same artists and the new possibilities offered by their own manufactory? The Prussian porcelain rooms can definitely be seen as one source of inspiration. However, the way in which Augustus the Strong enlarged his collection to form groups (families) of porcelain – long before the

scientific classification of Chinese and Japanese ceramics was made – and the way he then worked with these to create a “dialogue” of forms and styles is unique and ahead of its time, as was his feeling for quality. One could go so far as to call him the father of porcelain collectors in a modern sense.

Even if the Prussian and Saxon baroque porcelain rooms represent a special development, the discussion of their historical and cultural background turns out to form the key to a true understanding of them - a porcelain room is not always just a porcelain room.

Acknowledgments

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